Dissertation on Roman Politics in Religion

(1716)

Dissertation sur la politique des Romains dans la religion, text by Lorenzo Bianchi (*OC* VIII, 83–99). Montesquieu became a member of the Academy of Bordeaux in May 1716, and this paper, read on 18 June of that same year, was his first composition shared with that body, not counting his reception oration. It was first published in 1796 in the Plassan edition of Montesquieu's works (*Œuvres*, Paris: Plassan *et al.*, 1797, IV, pp. 193–207). Our base text, as in *OC* VIII, is the manuscript (in the hand of a copyist) which is part of the Montesquieu collection in the municipal library of Bordeaux (MS 828/VI, no 6).

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It was neither fear nor piety that established religion among the Romans, but rather the necessity in all societies to have one. The first kings were no less attentive to regulating worship and ceremonies than to making laws and building walls. I find this difference between Roman lawmakers and those of other peoples: that the former made the religion for the state, the latter the state for the religion. Romulus,[1] Titus,[2] and Numa[3] subordinated the gods to politics: the worship and ceremonies they instituted were found to be so wise that when the kings were expelled the yoke of religion was the only one from which this people, in clamoring for freedom, dared not emancipate itself.

1 According to legend, Rome's first king, Romulus (reigned 753–716 BCE), consulted the gods before laying out the sacred boundaries of Rome in 753 BCE, dedicated a temple to Jupiter, and established religious festivals and rites.

2 Titus Tatius, king of the Sabines, was for a brief time the co-ruler with Romulus of a combined Roman and Sabine kingdom.

3 Rome's legendary second king, Numa Pompilius (reigned 715–673 BCE), called "the founder of divine law" by Livy, established the *flamines*, priests of Roman religion, and also the *pontifices* and the Vestal Virgins (Livy 1.20).

When the Roman lawmakers established religion, they were not thinking of reforming morals, nor of laying down moral principles; they did not mean to constrain people who were not yet acquainted with the obligations of a society into which they had just entered.

Accordingly, they had at first only a general intention, which was to inspire fear of the gods in a people who feared nothing, and to make use of that fear to lead them in any way they wished.

Numa's successors did not dare to do what that prince had not done. The people, which had lost much of its fierceness and roughness, had become capable of greater discipline. It would have been easy to add to the religious ceremonies principles and rules of morality which it lacked, but the Romans were too shrewd not to realize how dangerous such a reform would have been. It would have meant acknowledging that their religion was imperfect; it would have given it a history and weakened its authority by attempting to strengthen it. The Romans' wisdom led them to choose a better course by establishing new laws. Human institutions may well change, but divine ones must be immutable like the gods themselves.

Thus the Roman senate, having charged the praetor Petillius[4] with examining the writings of king Numa which had been found in a stone chest four hundred years after that king's death, resolved to have them burned on receiving that praetor's report that the ceremonies which were prescribed in those writings differed greatly from the ones that were then being practiced, which could raise doubts in the minds of simple people and show them that the prescribed cult was not the same as the one which had been instituted by the original legislators and inspired by the nymph Egeria.[5]

They carried prudence further. No one could read the Sibylline books without the permission of the senate, which granted it only on great occasions and when the purpose was to console the people. All interpretations were prohibited. The books themselves were always kept locked up, and, by a very wise precaution, fanatical and seditious persons were disarmed.[6]

4 Quintus Petillius Cerialis (c. 30–c. 83 CE), Roman general, governor of Britain, and son-in-law of the emperor Vespasian.

5 According to Livy (1.21.3), Numa claimed that the spring-goddess Egeria, who had a grove outside the Porta Capena where the Vestal Virgins came to draw water, advised him on religious matters.

6 During times of crisis or unrest and following inexplicable portents and prodigies, the senate could order the *quindecimviri* to consult the Sibylline books containing the utterances of Sibyl of Cumae, brought to Rome by Tarquin Superbus, fifth king of Rome. The books contained information about rituals and sacrifices to be performed to placate the gods and avert calamities.

Soothsayers could make no pronouncements on public affairs without permission of the magistrates. Their art was absolutely subordinated to the will of the senate as had been ordered by the books of the pontiffs,[7] some fragments of which Cicero has preserved for us:[8] "Let them be the arbiters of war; let wonders and extraordinary events be deferred, if the senate so orders by the Etruscan haruspices."[9] And in another place: "There are two kinds of priests: one to preside over ceremonies and sacrifices, the other to interpret the mysterious words of those who tell destinies and of soothsayers, when the senate and the people call for them."[10]

Polybius included superstition among the advantages the Roman people had over other peoples:[11] what appears ridiculous to the wise is necessary for the fools; and this people, which is so easily moved to anger, needs to be checked by an invisible power.

The augurs[12] and haruspices[13] were the genuine grotesques of paganism, but they will not be thought ridiculous if one reflects that in a wholly popular religion like that one, there was nothing extravagant. The credulity of the people made amends for everything among the Romans; the more contrary a thing was to human reason, the more it seemed to them divine. A simple truth would not have affected them deeply: they had to have causes for wonderment; they needed signs from the deity, and they found them only in the supernatural or the ridiculous.

In truth, it was a very extravagant thing to make the welfare of the republic depend on the sacred appetite of a chicken[14] and on the disposition of the

7 I.e., the *Commentarii pontificum*, containing the so-called "Laws of Numa," manuals to guide the pontiffs (*pontifices*), who were the ultimate authority on all religious questions, in the proper performance of religious observances.

8 Book II, *De Legibus*. (M) (II, 20–21.)

9 In Latin in Montesquieu's text: *Bella disceptanto: prodigia, portenta ad Etruscos et aruspices si senatus jusserit deferunto*.

10 In Latin: *Sacerdotum genera duo sunto: unum quod praesit ceremoniis et sacriis, alterum quod interpretetur fatidicorum et vatum fata incognita cum senatus populusque ads[c]iverit*.

11 See Polybius, *Histories*, 6, ch. 56, 6–12.

12 Augurs interpreted the will of the gods from the flight of birds, and their art was called *augurium*, or *auspicium*. Roman magistrates would scan the skies prior to meetings of the Roman assembly, and the augurs interpreted what they had seen. Being an augur was considered one of the highest dignities in the state, and Cicero was proud of being one, though by his time educated Romans no longer believed in the science of divination.

13 The haruspices were Etruscan soothsayers who divined the will of the gods by inspecting the entrails of animals sacrificed to honor the gods, or by interpreting natural phenomena such as lightning or earthquakes.

14 The "sacred chickens" were kept by the Roman augurs. If they eagerly consumed grain when it was offered to them, this was regarded as a good omen for conducting senate business, or for commencing a military expedition.

victims' entrails.[15] But those who introduced these ceremonies were well aware of their strength and weakness, and it was only for good reasons that they sinned against reason itself.

If this rite had been more reasonable, clever people would have been fooled by it as well as the commoners, and in that way all the advantage which could be expected from it would have been lost. Ceremonies were therefore required which could sustain the superstition of some and enter into the politics of others; that is what divinations provided. There the decrees of heaven were placed in the mouths of the leading senators, enlightened men who knew equally well the foolishness and the utility of the divinations.

Cicero[16] says that Fabius[17] when he was an augur held as a rule that what was advantageous to the republic was always done under good auspices: "What is done under the best auspices is what is done for the welfare of the republic; what is done against the republic is done against the auspices."[18] The same author[19] says he agrees with Marcellus[20] that although the credulity of the common folk had originally established the auguries, the practice had been retained for the benefit of the republic; and he makes this distinction between Romans and foreign nations, that the latter invoked it indiscriminately on all occasions, and the former only in matters which involved the public interest. Cicero[21] informs us that a thunderbolt striking on the left was a good omen, except in assemblies of the people, *praeterquam ad comitia*: the rules of the art ceased on that occasion; the magistrates judged the favorability of the auspices as they saw fit, and these auspices were a bridle with which they led the people. Cicero adds: "It was settled for the good of the republic that the leading citizens be the judges either for the holding of assemblies, or for voting on laws, or for judgments of the people or the

15 All the sacrificial victims referred to by Montesquieu in this essay are animals. The Romans considered the sacrifice of humans emblematic of foreign, barbarian customs, though there were occasional human sacrifices in Rome. In the fourth century CE, the emperor Theodosius banned the sacrifice of animals, labeling the practice *superstitio*.

16 *On Old Age*. (M) (IV, 11.)

17 Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus (280–203 BCE), Roman statesman, general, dictator, and augur.

18 In Latin: *optimis auspiciis geri quae pro salute reipublicae gererentur; quae contra repulicam gererentur contra auspicia fieri*.

19 *On Divination*. (M) (II, 35–36.)

20 Marcus Claudius Marcellus (268–208 BCE), the Roman general renowned for numerous military feats in both the Gallic War of 225 BCE and the Second Punic War (218–-201 BCE).

21 *On Divination*. (M) (II, 35.)

election of magistrates."[22] He had previously stated that one read in the holy books "when Jupiter thunders and casts bolts of lightning, it is forbidden to hold assemblies of the people."[23] That had been introduced, he said, to provide the magistrates with a pretext for breaking off assemblies of the people: "That had been instituted in the public interest; indeed the intent was to have a reason for not convening the assemblies."[24]

Moreover, it was immaterial whether the victim that was sacrificed was found to be a good or a bad omen, for when they were not happy with the first, they sacrificed a second, a third, a fourth which were called *hostiae succedaneae*. Aemilius Paullus,[25] wishing to sacrifice, was obliged to slay twenty victims; the gods were appeased only with the last one in which were found signs that promised victory. That is why it was customary to say that in sacrifices the last victims were always more valuable than the first.

Caesar was not as patient as Aemilius Paullus. "After sacrificing several victims without obtaining good omens, he went into the curia, scorning all religion."[26]

As the magistrates found themselves the masters of omens, they had a sure way of turning the people away from a war that would have been disastrous, or of making them undertake one that might have been useful. The soothsayers who always followed the armies, and who were rather the interpreters of the generals than of the gods, inspired confidence in the soldiers. If by chance some ill omen had terrified the army, a shrewd general converted its meaning and made it favorable to himself. In such a way Scipio,[27] who fell while jumping from his vessel onto the African shore, took some earth in his hands: "I hold you," he said, "O land of Africa!" and with these words rendered favorable an omen which had seemed so dire.[28] The Sicilians,

22 In Latin: *hoc institutum reipublicae causa est, ut comitiorum, vel in jure legume, vel in judiciis populi, vel in creandis magistratibus principes civitatis essent interpretes* (Cicero, *On Divination*, II, 35).

23 In Latin: *Jove tonante et fulgurante comitia populi habere nefas esse* (Cicero, *On Divination*, II, 18).

24 In Latin: *hoc reipublicae causa constitutum, comitiorum enim non habendorum, causas esse voluerunt*.

25 Lucius Aemilius Paullus (229–160 BCE), twice consul of Rome (182, 168 BC) and victor in 168 over king Perseus at the Battle of Pydna ending the Third Macedonian War (171–168 BCE).

26 In Latin: *pluribus hostiis caesis, cum litare non posset introiit curiam spreta religione*. See Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* ("Lives of the Caesars"), Caesar, LXXXI).

27 Publius Cornelius Scipio (236–183 BCE), the Roman general whose victory over Hannibal at the Battle of Zama in 202 BCE ended the Second Punic War and earned him the cognomen Africanus.

28 Actually it was Caesar, not Scipio, who said this: see Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* ("Lives of the Caesars"), Caesar, LIX).

having embarked on some expedition to Africa, were so terrified by a solar eclipse that they were ready to abandon their mission; but the general explained to them that in truth this eclipse would have been a bad sign if it had appeared before their embarkation, but that, since it had appeared only afterwards, it could threaten only the Africans: in that way he put an end to their fright and found in a cause for fear a means of bolstering their courage.

Caesar was warned several times by the soothsayers not to go to Africa before winter; he did not listen to them, and thus got the jump on his enemies who, without this advance, would have had time to unite their forces.[29]

When Crassus[30] during a sacrifice allowed his knife to slip from his hands, it was taken as a bad omen, but he reassured the people by saying: "Bon courage: at least my sword has never fallen from my hands."[31] When Lucullus[32] was ready to do battle with Tigranes,[33] they came to tell him it was an inauspicious day: "Then let us [. . .] strive with might and main," he said, "to make this, instead of an ill-omened and gloomy day, a glad and welcome day to the Romans."[34] Tarquin the Proud,[35] meaning to establish games in honor of the goddess Mania,[36] consulted the oracle of Apollo, which answered obscurely and said they had to sacrifice heads for heads: *capitibus pro capitibus supplicandum*. The prince, even more cruel than superstitious, had some children sacrificed. But Junius Brutus[37] changed this horrible sacrifice, for he had it carried out with garlic and poppy heads, and thereby fulfilled or evaded the oracle.[38]

They cut the Gordian knot when they could not untie it. Thus Clodius Pulcher, wanting to begin a naval battle, had the sacred chickens thrown into the sea, to make them drink, he said, since they refused to eat.[39]

29 See Caesar, *Bellum Africum* 3.1, a work which is not actually by Caesar but by one of his officers. See also Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* ("Lives of the Caesars"), Caesar, LIX.

30 Marcus Licinius Crassus (115–53 BCE), an extremely wealthy supporter of Sulla in the Civil War between Sulla and Marius (83–82 BCE). He was praetor in 73 BCE, consul in 70 BCE, and censor in 65 BCE prior to forming the First Triumvirate with Caesar and Pompey in 60 BCE; he was killed in battle in 54 BCE during an invasion of Parthia.

31 See Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, XIX.

32 Lucius Licinius Lucullus (118–57/56 BCE), skilled general and victor in the third Mithridatic War (73–63 BCE).

33 Tigranes II, king of Armenia from 95 to 55 BCE.

34 Plutarch, *Sayings of the Romans* (*Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931, III, 205) and *Life of Lucullus*, I.

35 Tarquin Superbus (d. 495 BCE), who according to legend was the last king of Rome.

36 Mania was the goddess of the dead who ruled the underworld along with Mantus.

37 Lucius Junius Brutus, the legendary founder of the Roman republic (509 BCE) who overthrew Rome's last king after the rape of Lucretia by Tarquin's son Sextus Tarquinius.

38 Macrobius, Book I. (M) *Saturnalia* vii.

39 Valerius Maximus, Book I. (M) (*Nine Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, I, 4.) Publius Claudius Pulcher (died c. 249–247 BCE), consul and commander of the Roman fleet in

It is true that they sometimes punished a general for failure to follow the omens, and even that was a new effect of the Roman policy: they wanted the people to see that defeats, cities captured, and battles lost were not the result of a bad constitution of the state or of the weakness of the republic, but of the impiety of a citizen who had angered the gods. With this conviction, it was not difficult to restore their confidence to the people: all it took for that was a few ceremonies and sacrifices.

Thus, when the city was threatened or afflicted by some misfortune, they did not fail to look for the cause, which was always the anger of some god they had neglected to worship; it was enough, to avoid that happening, to make sacrifices and processions and to purify the city with torches, sulfur, and salt water. The victim was led around the ramparts before being slaughtered, which was called "sacrificium amburbium, et amburbiale."[40] They even went so far sometimes as to purify the armies and the fleets, after which everyone again renewed his courage.

Scævola,[41] a high priest, and Varro,[42] one of their great theologians, said that the people had to be kept in the dark about many true things, and believe many false ones. St. Augustine[43] says that Varro had thereby revealed the entire secret of politicians and ministers of state. "He made known the true means of the wise by which kingdoms and people would be governed."[44]

The same Scævola, according to St. Augustine,[45] divided the gods into three classes: those who had been established by the poets, those who had been established by the philosophers, and those who had been established by the magistrates, *a principibus civitatis*.

Those who read Roman history and are a bit discerning find at every turn aspects of this policy we have just pointed out. Thus we see Cicero, who in private and among his friends repeatedly confesses his unbelief: "Do you think me mad enough to believe these things?"[46] And we see the same Cicero speaking in public with extraordinary zeal against the impiety of

249 BCE during the First Punic War, was fined for incompetence and impiety after ignoring the omen of the sacred chickens refusing to eat.

40 "Sacrifice led around the city."

41 Publius Mucius Scævola (died c. 115 BCE) was tribune of the plebs in 141, praetor in 136, consul in 133 and *pontifex maximus* from 130 to 115.

42 Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE), author of *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum* ("Of antiquities human and divine"), dividing Roman religion into mythical, natural, and civil theology.

43 *De civitate Dei* ["On the city of God"], I.4 c. 31. (M)

44 In Latin: *Totum consilium prodidit sapientum per quod civitates et populi regerentur*.

45 *The City of God*, Book IV, chapter xxxi [IV, 27].

46 In Latin: *adeone me delirare censes ista ut credam* (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, I, vi, 10).

Verres.[47] We see a Clodius,[48] who had insolently profaned the mysteries of the good goddess, and whose impiety had been marked by twenty decrees of the senate, himself delivering an oration full of zeal, to that senate which had denounced him, against the disrespect of ancient practices and religion. We see a Sallust,[49] the most corrupt of all the citizens, placing at the head of his works a preface worthy of the gravity and austerity of Cato. I would never finish, if I wanted to exhaust all the examples.

Although the magistrates did not subscribe to the religion of the people, one must not imagine that they had none at all. Mr. Cudworth[50] has very ably proven that those among the pagans who were enlightened adored a supreme deity of whom the gods of the multitude were only an element. Pagans, who were not scrupulous about rites, believed that it did not matter whether one worshiped the divinity itself or the divinity's manifestations: to worship, for example, in Venus the passive power of nature, or the supreme divinity insofar as it can subsume all generation, or to worship the sun or the supreme being insofar as it gives life to plants and makes the earth fertile with its warmth. Thus the Stoic Balbus[51] says in Cicero that God participates by his nature in all things here below; that he is Ceres on earth, Neptune on the seas: "They could discern a god who participates in the essence of each thing, Ceres on earth, Neptune on the sea, other divinities in other places. We must venerate and worship these gods, whatever their nature may be and by whatever name we are accustomed to calling them."[52] We would know more about this if we had the book that Asclepiades[53] composed, entitled *The Harmony of All Theologies*.

47 Gaius Verres (115–43 BCE), proconsul of Sicily forced into exile in 69 BCE following Cicero's successful prosecution of him for corruption.

48 In 62 BCE Publius Clodius Pulcher (93–52 BCE) profaned the rites of *bona dea* ("the good goddess"), reserved for women, by disguising himself as a woman to gain entry to Caesar's house where he hoped to seduce Caesar's second wife, Pompeia. Cicero, facing a bribed jury, unsuccessfully prosecuted Clodius for his violation of religious protocol, and they became bitter enemies as a result. See also note 98 on p. 75.

49 Gaius Sallustius Crispus (86–35 BCE), author of *The Conspiracy of Cataline*, *The Jugurthine War*, and the *Histories*.

50 Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688), author of *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678).

51 Quintus Lucilius Balbus was a Stoic philosopher from Cadiz and a pupil of Panaetius; in *On the Nature of the Gods* (2.71) Cicero makes Balbus the spokesman of Stoic views.

52 In Latin: *deus pertinens per naturum cujusque rei, per terras Ceres, per mare Neptunus alia per alia poterunt intelligi qui qualescunque sint quoque eos nomine consuetudo mencupaverit, hos deos et venerari et colere debemus*. (Montesquieu slightly misquotes Cicero's text, which is *De natura deorum*, II, 28.)

53 Asclepiades of Phlius (c. 350–c. 270 BCE), Greek philosopher in the Eretrian school of philosophy.

As the dogma of the world-soul was almost universally accepted, and as each part of the universe was considered a living member in which this soul was diffused, it seemed permissible to worship all those parts indiscriminately and that the ritual should be arbitrary, as was the dogma.

Such was the source of that spirit of tolerance and kindness that prevailed in the pagan world. There was no thought of persecuting and mangling one another; all religions and all theologies were equally good; heresies, wars, and religious quarrels were unknown; provided everyone went to the temple to worship, every citizen was high priest in his family.

The Romans were even more tolerant than the Greeks, who always spoiled everything. Everyone knows the unhappy fate of Socrates.

It is true that the Egyptian religion was always proscribed in Rome, because it was intolerant, and wanted to reign alone, and to establish itself on the ruins of the others. So the spirit of kindness and peace that prevailed among the Romans was the real cause of the war they relentlessly waged against it.

Valerius Maximus[54] reports the action of Aemilius Paullus who, following a report of the senate ordering the destruction of the temples of the Egyptian deities, himself took an ax and struck the first blows so as to encourage by his example the workers stricken by a superstitious fear.

But the priests of Isis and Serapis had even more zeal for establishing these ceremonies than Rome had for prohibiting them. Although Augustus, according to Dio,[55] had forbidden their practice in Rome, Agrippa,[56] who governed the city in his absence, was obliged to forbid it a second time. One can see in Tacitus and in Suetonius[57] the frequent edicts that the senate was obliged to issue in order to banish this cult from Rome.

We must note that the Romans confused the Jews with the Egyptians, as we know they confused the Christians with the Jews:[58] these two religions were long regarded as two branches of the first, and shared with it the hatred, contempt, and persecution of the Romans. The same edicts that abolished the Egyptian ceremonies in Rome always included the Jewish ceremonies

54 Book I, ch. iii. (M): see p. 65, note 39.

55 Book 34. (M) (Book 54, 6.) Dio Cassius (c. 150–235 CE) was a Roman senator, consul, and proconsul of Africa, who wrote a history of Rome (in Greek) that is a key source for the last years of the republic and the early empire.

56 Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa (64/62–12 BCE), son-in-law of Augustus, played a key role in the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, Augustus' victory over Marc Antony and Cleopatra.

57 [Tacitus, *Annals*], I, 2. (M) Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* ("Lives of the Caesars"), Augustus, XXXI and XCIII.

58 Cf. *PL* 83 and *Pensées* 167 and 232.

with them, as we see in Tacitus[59] and Suetonius in the lives of Tiberius and Claudius.[60] It is even more clear that historians have never distinguished the Christians' rite from the others. They had not even corrected this error in Hadrian's time, as we see from a letter which the emperor wrote from Egypt to the consul Servianus: "All who in Egypt worship Serapis[61] are Christians, and even those who are called bishops, are attached to the cult of Serapis; there is no Jew, no prince of a synagogue, no Samaritan, no Christian priest, no mathematician, no soothsayer, and no baptizer who does not worship Serapis; even the patriarch of the Jews indiscriminately worships Serapis and Christ. These people have no god but Serapis: he is the god of the Christians, of the Jews, and of all peoples": *illi qui Serapium colunt, christiani sunt; et devoti sunt Serapi, qui se Christi episcopos dicunt. Nemo hic archisynagoga Judaeorum, nemo Samarites, nemo christianorum presbyter, non mathematicus, non aruspex, non aliptes, qui non Serapium colat; Ipse ille patriarcha judeorum scilicet, cum Aegyptum venerit, ab aliis Serapidam adorare, ab aliis cogitur Christum . . . viris illis deus est Serapia: hunc Judei, hunc christiani, hunc omnes et gentes*.[62] Is it possible to have more confused notions of these three religions, and to conflate them more crudely?

Among the Egyptians, the priests formed a separate caste,[63] which was maintained at public expense. Whence arose several drawbacks. All the wealth of the state was being sunk into a society of men who, always receiving and never giving back, imperceptibly were taking everything. The priests of Egypt, thus paid wages for doing nothing, were all languishing in an idleness from which they emerged only with the vices it produces; they were disorderly, restless, and enterprising, and these qualities made them extremely dangerous. In short, a body whose interests had been violently separated from those of the state was a monster, and those who had established it had sown in the society seeds of discord and of civil wars. Such was not the case in Rome, where the priesthood had been made a civil function: the ranks of augur and of head pontiff were magistracies; those who were invested with them were members of the senate, and consequently did not have interests different from those of that body. "Far from using superstition to oppress the republic, they employ it usefully to sustain it. In our

59 Book II. (M) (Tacitus, *Annals*.)
60 Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* ("Lives of the Caesars"), Tiberius, XXVI and Claudius, XXII and XXV.
61 Serapis was a Graeco-Egyptian god whose worship was introduced by Ptolemy I Soter of Egypt (366–282 BCE).
62 Flavius Vopiscus, *Vita Saturnini*. (M) (See *Histoire Augustae scriptores*, 1620.)
63 Cf. *Romans*, chapter 22.

city," says Cicero,[64] "the kings and the magistrates who have succeeded them have always had a double character, and have governed the state under the auspices of religion": "In ancient times those who held power also possessed knowledge of augury, witness our city, where both the kings and augurs, and later private citizens invested with the same priesthood, governed the republic by the authority of religion."[65]

The *duumviri*[66] were in charge of sacred matters; the *quindecimviri* attended to the religious ceremonies and kept the books of the Sibyls which the *decemviri* and the *duumviri* had done formerly. They consulted the oracles when the senate had so ordained and reported back, adding their opinion. They were also assigned to execute all that was prescribed in the books of the Sibyls, and to arrange for the celebration of secular games. In this way all religious ceremonies passed through the hands of the magistrates.

The kings of Rome had a kind of priesthood; there were certain ceremonies which only they could perform. When the Tarquins[67] were expelled, it was feared the people would perceive some change in the religion, for which reason a magistrate was established called *rex sacrorum*, and whose wife was called *regina sacrorum*,[68] who in the sacrifices fulfilled the functions of the former kings. This was the only vestige of royalty that the Romans retained at home.

The Romans enjoyed the advantage of having as legislator the wisest prince of which secular history has ever spoken:[69] that great man sought throughout his reign only to make justice and equity flourish, and his neighbors benefited no less from moderation than did his subjects. He established the *fetiales*,[70] who were priests without whose ministry neither peace nor war could be decided. We still have formularies of oaths taken by

64 Book I, *On Divination*. (M) (I, 40.)

65 In Latin: *apud veteres qui rerum potiebantur iidem augiria tenebant, ut testis est nostra civitas, in qua et reges et augures, et postea privati eodem sacerdotio praediti rempublicam religionum autoritate vexerunt* (Cicero, *De divinatione*, I, 40; Cicero is slightly misquoted).

66 "Kings of sacred things" or *duumviri sacrorum*, allegedly created by Tarquin Superbus. The *duumviri* performed sacrifices and kept the Sibylline Books. They served life terms and were chosen from the nobility. Their numbers were increased to ten (*decemviri sacris faciundis*) and then to fifteen (*quindecimviri sacris faciundis*) by Sulla.

67 The Tarquins were the legendary first five kings of Rome, expelled, according to tradition, in 509 BCE.

68 "King of sacred things" and "queen of sacred things."

69 Likely a reference to Numa Pompilius, although both Plutarch and Livy attributed the establishment of the *fetiales* to Tullus Hostilius (673–642 BCE), or to Ancus Marties (677–617 BCE), the legendary fourth king of Rome.

70 The *fetiales* were priests devoted to the worship of Jupiter. They served as ambassadors, advised the senate on foreign affairs, proclaimed war and peace, and confirmed treaties.

these *fetiales* when peace was concluded with some people. In the one that Rome concluded with Alba, a *fetial* says in Livy: "if the Roman people is the first to violate it, *publico consilio dolove malo*,[71] may he pray that Jupiter will strike them as he is about to strike the pig which he was holding in his hands": and immediately he struck it dead with a stone.

Before starting a war, one of these *fetiales* was sent to express grievances to the people which had caused some harm to the republic: he gave them a certain time to confer and seek means of re-establishing good relations; but if they neglected to come to a settlement, the fetial took leave and left the territory of that unjust people, after invoking against them the gods of both heaven and hell. Thereupon the senate decreed what it deemed just and pious; thus wars were never undertaken in haste, and they could only be the result of lengthy and mature deliberation.[72]

The policy that held sway in the Romans' religion developed even more in their victories. If superstition had been heeded, the gods of the conquerors would have been introduced among the vanquished; their temples would have been destroyed, and the establishment of a new rite would have imposed on them a servitude more severe than the first. They did something better. Rome herself submitted to the foreign divinities; she took them to her bosom, and through this bond, the strongest there is among men, she attached to herself peoples who regarded her more as a sanctuary of religion than as ruler of the world. But, so as not to make too many of them, the Romans, following the Greek example, skillfully conflated the foreign divinities with their own. If they found in their conquests a god similar to one of those who were worshipped in Rome, they adopted him, that is what it must be called, giving him the name of the Roman divinity, and bestowed upon him, if I dare use this expression, the right of citizenship in their city. Similarly, whenever they found some famous hero who had rid the earth of some monster, or subdued some barbarous people, they at once named him Hercules.

"We have advanced as far as the Ocean," says Tacitus,[73] "and we found there the columns of Hercules, either because Hercules has been there, or because we have attributed to that hero all the deeds worthy of his glory": *Ipsum quim etiam Oceanum illa tentavimus et superesse adhuc Herculis columnas fama vulgavit, sive adiit Hercules, sive quidquid ubique magnificum est in claritatem eius referre consuevimus.*

71 "Through public deliberation or fraudulently." 72 See Plutarch, *Life of Numa*, XII, 7–8.
73 Book V, ch. xxxiv. (M) (*On the Origins and Situation of the Germans*.)

Varro counted forty-four of these subduers of monsters. Cicero[74] counted only six, twenty-two Muses, five Suns, four Vulcans, five Mercuries, four Apollos, and three Jupiters.

Eusebius[75] goes much further, counting almost as many Jupiters as peoples.

The Romans, who actually had no divinity other than the genius of the republic, paid no attention to the disorder and confusion into which they threw mythology. The credulity of peoples, which always surpasses foolishness and extravagance, made up for everything.

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74 Book III, *On the Nature of the Gods*. (M) (III, 16, 21–23, 34.) Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340 CE), was a noted historian of Christianity and expositor of its doctrines.

75 *Praeparatio evangelica* [*Preparation for the Gospel*], Book III. (M)

76 Lucius Sergius Catilina (108–62 BCE), experienced Roman politician and senator, having run unsuccessfully against Cicero for consul in 64, laid plans to seize control of the Roman government. After Cicero discovered the plot and denounced the conspirators in October 63, they were put to death without trial by vote of the senate, though Catiline fled and was killed in battle along with most of his army in January 62.

77 Marc Antony (83–30 BCE), co-consul with Caesar in 44 and leader with Octavian and Lepidus of the Second Triumvirate (43–33), was killed at the Battle of Actium in 31, after Octavian, Caesar's great-nephew and adopted son, convinced the senate to declare war on Cleopatra and declare Antony a traitor.